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ABSTRACT

This booklet discusses the importance of all students being guaranteed a carefully crafted and appropriately balanced approach to reading instruction. Section 1, "Beginning Reading Instruction," discusses variation and inequity in reading instruction and reading skills nationwide. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has made it a priority to ensure high quality professional development in reading instruction skills for all elementary teachers; to raise preparation and licensure standards for elementary teachers; to develop certification standards for elementary paraprofessionals; to support quality early childhood and preschool programs; and to increase the availability of quality programs and materials in reading and English language arts. The AFT pledges to collaborate with other educational organizations to work on this issue, disseminate information, and provide high quality professional development to teachers and paraprofessionals. Section 2, "Questions and Answers," answers questions on the need for a reading resolution; reading research and phonics; research on reading difficulties among regular-education versus special-education students; a balanced approach to reading instruction; the paraprofessional role; diagnostic assessments in kindergarten; and older students' reading needs. Section 3, "Background Information," presents an essay written by Liz McPike that discusses the importance of reading skills and what is known about how best to help children learn to read. Section 4, "Background Reading," presents suggested reading materials. (SM)

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Improving Reading Achievement: It's Union Work

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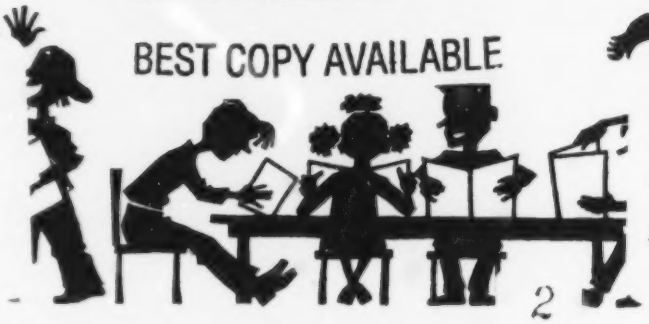

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Improving Reading Achievement: It's Union Work

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I. Beginning Reading Instruction

AFT Convention Resolution
Adopted July 19, 1998

In today's society, the child who doesn't learn to read does not make it in life. If children don't learn to read early enough, if they don't learn to read with comprehension, if they don't read fluently enough to read broadly and reflectively across all content areas, if they don't learn to read effortlessly enough to render reading pleasurable, their chances for a fulfilling life—by whatever measure: academic success, financial stability, the ability to find satisfying work, personal autonomy, self-esteem—are practically nil.

In his 1996 State of the Union speech, President Clinton addressed this issue by declaring it a national priority to ensure that every child in America reads independently by the end of third grade. The AFT agrees. Not only is this an extraordinarily modest goal for the richest, most powerful nation on earth, it is one that must be met before any other education goal can be met.

How are we doing as a nation? According to the latest international comparison—a 1994 study from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)—our students are among the world's best readers. Nevertheless, state, national and international assessments, including the IEAs, also indicate there is still much work to be done. Because of differences in how various tests measure reading skill, estimates of the extent of the problem vary widely—from the IEA study that showed 30 percent to 40 percent of U.S. fourth graders perform-

ing below average for developed nations, to a 1994 California assessment that gave failing grades in reading to 59 percent of fourth graders. Whatever the correct figure for overall proficiency, reading researchers report that, by fourth grade—the first year in which most states systematically assess student achievement—about 20 percent of U.S. students are already so far behind in reading that they may never catch up.

Poor, immigrant and minority children, some of whose parents may also suffer from low literacy levels, represent a disproportionate percentage of those with the lowest reading achievement. Affluence, however, is no guarantee of reading success. In fact, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), approximately one-third of all poorly performing fourth graders are the children of college-educated parents—indicating that reading difficulty is a national problem that extends across all socioeconomic strata. We can and must do better.

The ultimate goal of all reading and English language arts instruction is to allow students to become fluent readers, writers and thinkers, who are able to comprehend, learn from and add to the collective imagination, experience and wisdom of all human history. To accomplish this, students must be challenged to meet high academic standards and be exposed to a rich core curriculum that will give them a strong vocabulary base, broad background knowledge and ample exposure to an interesting array of narrative and expository texts. They must learn to read for understanding and be given a command of the rules of spelling, grammar and syntax, so that they may learn to write with imagination, clarity and precision. And, undergirding all of this, at a very early age, they must be given the keys to the speech-sound-symbol system of the English language that will allow them to decipher written text. In other words, they must learn the alphabetic code and how to use it to read and write words.

Sadly, it is during this very elemental stage of reading that many students encounter problems. Fortunately, we know a good deal about how to help. The first step is to apply the consistent findings of hundreds of research studies, conducted over the past several decades in such diverse fields as neuroscience, psychology,

linguistics, cognitive science and education that have helped us understand how children learn to read and what we must do to improve their early reading instruction.

Researchers have identified several basic, interconnected subskills that all children must master to become proficient readers. Young students must develop phonemic awareness—the recognition that all words are made up of separate sounds, or phonemes. They must learn phonics—the ability to link these sounds to the specific letters or combinations of letters that are used to represent them in written language. And the association between letters and sounds must become virtually automatic, so that students learn to decode words almost instantly and are able to concentrate on the meaning of written text.

Research suggests that 50 percent to 60 percent of students are able to master the first two subskills with relative ease—although systematic, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics can make them even better readers. But without such instruction, the remaining 40 percent to 50 percent—especially those without a language-rich home environment or with mild to severe reading disabilities—may experience very real problems that, unless resolved by the end of third grade, are likely to place them at a permanent educational disadvantage.

This is not to say that the ability to decode words is sufficient to make every child a proficient reader—just that it is a necessary precondition. In this sense, the nation's recurring reading wars, pitting phonics-based instruction against literature-based instruction, represent a false dichotomy. Children need a balance of both. But the way in which this balance is struck—in particular, the sequence and methods by which each is delivered—is critical. With very early exposure to systematic, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, decoding and reading comprehension skills, say researchers, virtually every child—except perhaps those with the most severe reading and cognitive disabilities—can be taught to read. In fact, it is estimated that 85 percent to 90 percent of students who are poor readers—including many now classified as learning disabled—could increase their reading skill to average levels with this type of intensive, early instruction delivered by skilled teachers. Research also shows that the use of decodable text—books and materials containing a high proportion of new words that adhere to phonetic principles students have already been taught—can help young students at the pre-primer and primer levels to master decoding skills and increase speed and fluency. For the vast majority of students, much of this can be accomplished before the end of first grade, enabling them to tackle the vast array of interesting and challenging children's literature that can help expand vocabulary and increase background knowledge and comprehension.

It is for these reasons that the AFT

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believes that all students must be guaranteed a carefully crafted and appropriately balanced approach to the teaching of reading. This must include early, systematic and explicit instruction in the necessary subskills—including phonemic awareness and phonics—as well as an early emphasis on listening skills, language development, conceptual and vocabulary development, storytelling and writing, a deep exploration of the treasure chest of rich and challenging children's literature, and literacy-related activities that can help enhance children's love of books and of learning. Standing in the way of this goal are two great obstacles: First, most instructional staff in elementary schools have never been provided with sufficient preparation in how to teach reading in a way that reflects what is now preponderant research evidence. And second, few materials and programs, based on this research, have been developed or field tested for effectiveness.

Therefore, **the AFT and its state and local affiliates will make it a priority to:** (1) ensure that all elementary school teachers are provided with high-quality professional development in the requisite skills and knowledge of how to teach beginning reading—and ensure that all classroom paraprofessionals in these schools receive high-quality professional development in how to reinforce reading instruction and help tutor struggling students; (2) raise the preparation and licensure standards for elementary school teachers to include a core curriculum in the teaching of reading that reflects the best research evidence and calls for extensive time-in-field experiences; (3) develop certification standards for elementary school classroom paraprofessionals that include an appropriate course of pre- and inservice training in research-based reading instruction and tutorial strategies; (4) support the kind of quality early childhood and preschool programs and services that increase the chances of reading success; and (5) increase the availability of programs and materials in reading and English language arts that have a track record of effectiveness. Specifically, we will work—through public advocacy, legislative activities, contract negotiations, publications, professional development programs and other means—to:

- Urge states and the federal government to fully fund early childhood programs, such as prenatal health care, child nutrition, the Home Instructional Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), and others that work with high-poverty families to help assure children's physical and cognitive health, including information about the critical importance of daily reading to children, from infancy on, and other research-based strategies that can be used at home to ensure that all students are reading-ready when they enter first grade.
- Urge the federal government, states and school districts to provide the quality

preschool and all-day kindergarten programs that can foster early literacy by developing children's language, vocabulary and conceptual skills, as well as helping to familiarize all students with books, the nature of print, the letters of the alphabet and their sounds, and the kinds of stories, information and ideas that text can offer. We also urge schools and districts to institute school-entry screening programs that can identify hearing, speech, language, vision and other problems that may impede student learning.

- Urge states and districts to fund and staff for lower class sizes in the primary grades in order to provide optimum conditions for early reading success.
- Urge all school districts and AFT locals to make it a high priority to ensure that all K-2 teachers and classroom paraprofessionals, at a minimum, are provided with professional development that reflects the research base in beginning reading. This should be followed, as quickly as possible, by the implementation of a research-based professional development program in reading and reading comprehension instruction for all instructional staff who work with student populations who are at high risk of reading failure, all other special education and remedial teachers, and ultimately, all instructional staff in every elementary school.
- Urge all teacher education programs and the organizations that represent them, such as the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, as well as accreditation agencies, such as the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, to support a stronger core curriculum in teacher preparation for reading instruction. This should include coursework on: the intricacies of the speech-sound-symbol system of the English language and the huge body of research about how it is best taught; how to advance students' conceptual, vocabulary and language development; how to tap students' prior knowledge and teach reading comprehension skills and strategies; how to

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teach English language arts, including writing, grammar and syntax; how to adapt teaching methods to accommodate the needs of linguistic minority students; and how to enhance reading instruction and build background knowledge through the use of children's literature—and to practice these skills and understandings in clinical teaching settings.

- Urge standards-setting bodies, such as the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, and state licensing authorities to raise licensure requirements for elementary teachers to include a clear definition of what teachers should know and be able to do with regard to the teaching of reading; a stipulation of required coursework in reading instruction that incorporates the research base on effective instructional practices; and provisions for a well-supervised induction period to ensure that these instructional practices have been mastered.

- Urge school districts to enforce federal regulations, such as Title I, regarding entry-level employment standards for classroom paraprofessionals, and urge states and districts to develop certification standards for classroom paraprofessionals, especially those who work with beginning and struggling readers, that clearly define roles and responsibilities, basic skills and an appropriate course of pre- and in-service training in research-based instructional and tutorial strategies.

- Urge the federal government to help fund the development of research-based materials to help improve reading instruction; ensure that these materials are field tested, using experimental and control groups, to determine how well they work to raise students' reading achievement; disseminate the resulting effectiveness and implementation data to schools and districts; and fund scale-up efforts for the most effective programs and materials.

- Urge textbook publishers and program developers to revise existing materials and to develop new materials for early reading instruction that reflect the

research base and to conduct field tests on a routine basis, which can provide schools and districts with quantitative and qualitative evidence of effectiveness. Such materials should guide instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling and grammar, provide decodable text at the pre-primer and primer levels, and expose students to a rich and challenging array of children's literature that can hold students' interest, help build vocabulary and background knowledge and increase comprehension. These programs and materials should also include aligned in-class assessments that are easy for teachers to administer on a periodic basis and that can be used to help monitor student progress, inform instruction, adjust student groupings and diagnose problems early.

- Urge school boards and state and district curriculum authorities to approve, for broad adoption, only those materials for beginning reading instruction that are designed to reflect the research base and that have clearly been shown to be effective in helping to raise student achievement levels, using valid, scientific field tests, and to institute a method for ongoing evaluation of the efficacy of adopted reading materials.
- Urge schools and districts to employ periodic research-based diagnostic assessments, beginning in kindergarten, that can help spot reading problems early. Results of these assessments should be used by districts to develop and implement intervention systems and by states and districts to target sufficient funds to help address any reading difficulties before students fall too far behind.
- Urge states and districts to fund, staff and fully stock a library in every school and make sure that all school libraries are accessible and convenient for students and their families.

In addition, the AFT pledges to:

- Work with other educational organizations, such as the Learning First Alliance, to identify effective research-based reading programs and to persuade school boards and state and local legislative bodies to dedicate adequate resources to the adoption and full implementation of such programs in every public elementary school.
- Continue to disseminate information on reading research and effective instructional practice to AFT members and the general public through local and national publications.
- Continue to use the AFT Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) program to provide high-quality professional development to teachers and paraprofessionals in reading research and effective instructional practices in reading.

…the nation's recurring reading wars, pitting phonics-based instruction against literature-based instruction, represent a false dichotomy. Children need a balance of both. But the way in which this balance is struck—in particular, the sequence and methods by which each is delivered—is critical.

II. Questions & Answers

Why a reading resolution?

Reading is a prerequisite for all other learning. Reading is also a skill that a significant percentage of U.S. students—including many with college-educated parents—have difficulty learning. Reading problems are even more widespread among children of the poor, the uneducated, non-English speakers, minorities, and inner-city dwellers. The good news is that there is now a large body of research—and a consensus among the majority of researchers and educators—about what we must do to help these students succeed. The moment is ripe to take advantage of this consensus, to get good materials into the hands of teachers and paraprofessionals, and to provide them with the professional development they need to improve the reading achievement of their students.

Is this attention to reading research really another pendulum swing, this time toward phonics?

No, especially since there is compelling research to argue against the use of isolated phonics in reading instruction, just as that research argues against the use of a language-experience-only approach. There is strong evidence to suggest that most beginning readers need early, systematic, and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics. But studies also show that beginning readers need early exposure to the richness of children's literature, to storytelling, to writing and listening skills, to the expository texts that can serve as

important sources of background knowledge and vocabulary, and to lessons providing conceptual development and reading comprehension. In other words, the "reading wars"—pitting phonics against whole language—represent a false dichotomy. Overwhelmingly, the research shows that children need a careful balance of both.

Isn't there research to support all sides on how to teach reading?

In some respects, yes. But it is the quality and quantity of research—not which side likes the results—that merits attention. Over the past few years, results have been released from a number of carefully designed and conducted national and international studies from many diverse fields—such as neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, cognitive science, and education—that reinforce one another as to how children learn to read and what we must do to improve their early reading instruction.

Although there are some who will accept no compromise, these strong findings have helped most experts arrive at a consensus. The full breadth of research on early reading instruction was recently reviewed in *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children,* a report by a 17-member panel of eminent scholars assembled by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. This group, which studied the range of reading research for over two years, concluded by calling for a balanced approach to the teaching of reading. This includes the use of systematic, explicit phonics, daily exposure to literature, and attention to comprehension—in other words, the kind of balance that the AFT calls for. Many other education organizations also recognize this consensus. That's why the AFT—along with the NEA, PTA and other major administrators, school board and superintendent organizations, who are all members of the Learning First Alliance—recently endorsed a position paper on beginning reading that is also in accord with the AFT resolution.

Has there been enough research on regular education students and reading difficulties or has it all come from special education research?

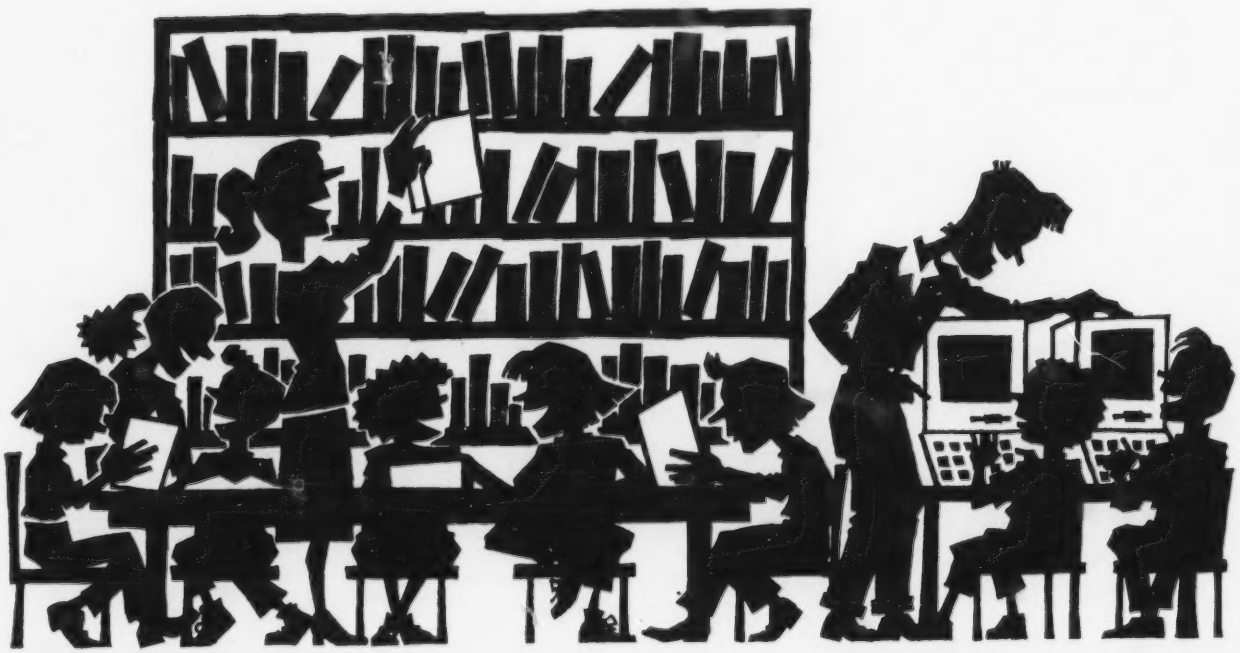
A number of recent, significant findings on beginning reading—but by no means all—were from reading disability studies funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) of the National Institutes of Health. But to find out about reading disabilities—which students develop them and why—many of these studies were actually conducted on a randomly selected general population of children. Thus, over 33 years, NICHD studies involved 34,501 children and adults, including 21,860 skilled readers and 12,641 impaired readers. In other words, these studies represent a source of important information about reading instruction for regular education as well as special education students.

So is achieving a "balanced approach" the point?

Yes, as long as we understand what an appropriate balance means. It would be a shame if, after we had learned so much and reached a hard-won consensus, "balance" became just another buzzword to describe the status quo. This resolution, as well as additional materials (see *Background Reading* on page 21), provides a lot of detail to ensure that AFT members are familiar with the broad outlines of research and the consensus on how to achieve a balance that will result in reading gains.

Will the steps called for in this resolution diminish professional autonomy?

No. In fact, they have the potential to help build a research-based profession, with a full toolbox of proven teaching strategies and instructional materials. Research can give us better tools to choose from, as well as a better understanding of which tools to use when and with which students. But, as with medicine and most other research-based professions—or any field that requires a massive body of professional skills and knowledge—it will always be up to the judgment and skill of the individual



practitioner to diagnose problems accurately, to choose the most appropriate tools in light of that diagnosis, and then to use those tools effectively. But, also as in other research-based professions, it will be incumbent upon the practitioners to practice their profession in a way that is responsibly informed by the best available evidence of what works.

What is the role of paraprofessionals in helping children to read?

Paraprofessionals play a significant role in supporting teachers' work in the classroom. Programs like Success for All have shown that, when properly trained, paraprofessionals have been extremely effective when engaged in meaningful roles that support the educational programs designed, led, and evaluated by classroom teachers.

Is it appropriate to use diagnostic assessments beginning in kindergarten?

It's important to be very careful about how tests are used with young children. We believe, however, that school systems should start employing diagnostic assessments on a routine and appropriate basis, beginning when students enter kindergarten or first grade. According to research, intensive intervention programs can help the vast majority of struggling readers achieve reading proficiency if problems are caught early enough. If intervention is delayed until age 9, however—the approximate age that most states begin to test reading proficiency—roughly 75 percent of struggling students will experience reading difficulties through high school. It's not that older students can't be taught to read; it's just that the time and expense to help them catch up to their peers is so enormous that few school systems help all who need it.

Why talk about the early grades only? Many older students need help urgently.

This is a case of "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Many older students experience reading difficulty because they didn't receive the kind of instruction that they needed early enough. Therefore, by helping to improve reading instruction for very young students, the reforms called for in this resolution could also help prevent future reading problems for many older students. Also, while the level, intensity, and subject matter of the materials may differ, the strategies for teaching older nonreaders are basically the same as those discussed in this resolution. Currently, there are only a few age-appropriate, school-based programs for older students with enough research to show they are effective. A lot of program development and evaluation is being conducted in this area, however, and we are hopeful that several more appropriate strategies for struggling, older students will soon be identified.

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III. Background Information

This essay served as the introduction to a series of three articles on learning to read that appeared in the AFT journal, American Educator, *in summer 1995. It was written by Liz McPike, editor of the magazine.*

This we can say with certainty: If a child in a modern society like ours does not learn to read, he doesn't make it in life. If he doesn't learn to read well enough to comprehend what he is reading, if he doesn't learn to read effortlessly enough to render reading pleasurable, if he doesn't learn to read fluently enough to read broadly and reflectively across all the content areas, his chances for a fulfilling life, by whatever measure—academic success, financial success, the ability to find interesting work, personal autonomy, self-esteem—are practically nil.

Because of the central role that reading ability plays in children's lives, it is in this area, above all others, that the knowledge base for the practice of teaching must be most closely studied and adhered to. There is no room for either confusion or dogmatism. Too much is at stake.

Keith Stanovich, one of the world's leading reading researchers and twice the recipient of the International Reading Association's Albert J. Harris award, has applied the concept of the "Matthew effect" to describe the dramatically different trajectories followed by those children who get off to a good start in reading and those who don't:

"The term Matthew effects derives from the

Gospel according to Matthew: 'For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath' (XXV:29).

"...Put simply, the story goes something like this: Children who begin school with little phonological awareness have trouble acquiring alphabetic coding skill and thus have difficulty recognizing words. Reading for meaning is greatly hindered when children are having too much trouble with word recognition. When word recognition processes demand too much cognitive capacity, fewer cognitive resources are left to allocate to higher-level processes of text integration and comprehension. Trying to read without the cognitive resources to allocate to understanding the meaning of the text is not a rewarding experience. Such unrewarding early reading experiences lead to less involvement in reading-related activities. Lack of exposure and practice on the part of the less-skilled reader further delays the development of automaticity and speed at the word recognition level. Thus reading for meaning is hindered, unrewarding reading experiences multiply, practice is avoided or merely tolerated without real cognitive involvement, and the negative spiral of cumulative disadvantage continues. Troublesome emotional side effects begin to be associated with school experiences, and these become a further hindrance to school achievement.

"Conversely, children who quickly develop decoding processes find reading enjoyable because they can concentrate on the meaning of the text. They read more in school and, of equal importance, reading becomes a self-chosen activity for them. The additional exposure and practice they get further develops their reading abilities....(R)eading develops syntactic knowledge, facilitates vocabulary growth, and broadens the general knowledge base. This facilitates the reading of more difficult and interesting texts...."

How many American children are caught in the downward spiral that Stanovich describes? No one has exact figures, but the accumulating evidence—both quantitative and anecdotal—is indeed troubling, and an increasing number of educators are expressing deep concern. Perhaps we need not spend valuable time calculating the precise number of children affected when we know we can say with confidence that we are talking about millions.

Recent evidence of reading difficulty comes from studies by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In April 1995, NAEP announced the latest reading scores for students across the country. Students in three grades in thirty-nine states were tested. Overall, fewer than a third of them were proficient in reading, that is, able to handle challenging texts competently, and only a very few (2 percent to 5 percent depending on the grade) were reading at advanced levels.

While middle-class children and children with normal cognitive development have by no means been spared from the growing incidence of reading problems, the pedagogical clock is ticking most relentlessly for youngsters from low-income and disadvantaged households—those who do not come to school with thousands of hours of exposure to print and conversation and word play and informal teaching that occurs in most middle-class households: being read to, learning rhymes and songs and playing word-sound games, watching and helping as the grocery list is drawn up and checked off, manipulating the magnet-

ic letters on the refrigerator, and so on. In contrast to these fortunate ones, as Marilyn Adams, the author of *Beginning To Read: Thinking and Learning about Print,* has written, there are children who "have barely even seen a book before entering school."

Also at serious risk, and again the numbers are high, are children whose cognitive architecture—for a wide variety of reasons—makes learning to read and write more difficult.

For these two groups of children in particular, as Adams has so compellingly put it, "we have not a classroom moment to waste."

What do we know about how best to help children learn to read?

1. Many elements of the Whole Language approach have brought new life to the reading and writing experience into the classrooms where students and teachers are working creatively together to open the door to full literacy. The early emphasis on writing; the deeper drawing from the rich treasure chest of good children's literature; the freedom for teachers to go beyond tightly regimented and constrained programs and to design a wide range of literacy events and activities; the recognition that prolonged periods of abstracted phonics drill, isolated from meaningful text, is not the way to teach reading; the understanding that learning depends in considerable degree upon capturing a child's interest and engaging his active participation, of setting before him a vision of something he very much wants to be part of: All of these have been invaluable contributions and a much-needed counterbalance to what in many cases was a dry and narrow approach to literacy development.

2. Whole Language means different things to different people, and for some educators it has meant combining the types of insights and activities described above with the direct and systematic teaching of all that is involved in mastering the alphabetic code. But many leaders and proponents of the Whole Language approach have so downgraded the importance of code-oriented instruction as to render it but an incidental part of a beginning reading program, if that. Direct instruction and systematic instruction are frowned upon, as is attention to individual words and the letter/sound sub-units of which they are composed. Children are advised to rely on context to figure out unfamiliar words. "Don't sound it out," warns *The Whole Language Teachers Newsletter.* But contextual clues are notoriously unreliable; they can't compete with skilled decoding. And the "wait-for-the-child-to-ask" orientation to decoding instruction doesn't do much for children who don't understand what to ask.

To the extent that Whole Language proponents equate learning to read with learning to talk, that is, both "natural" processes to which we are predisposed and

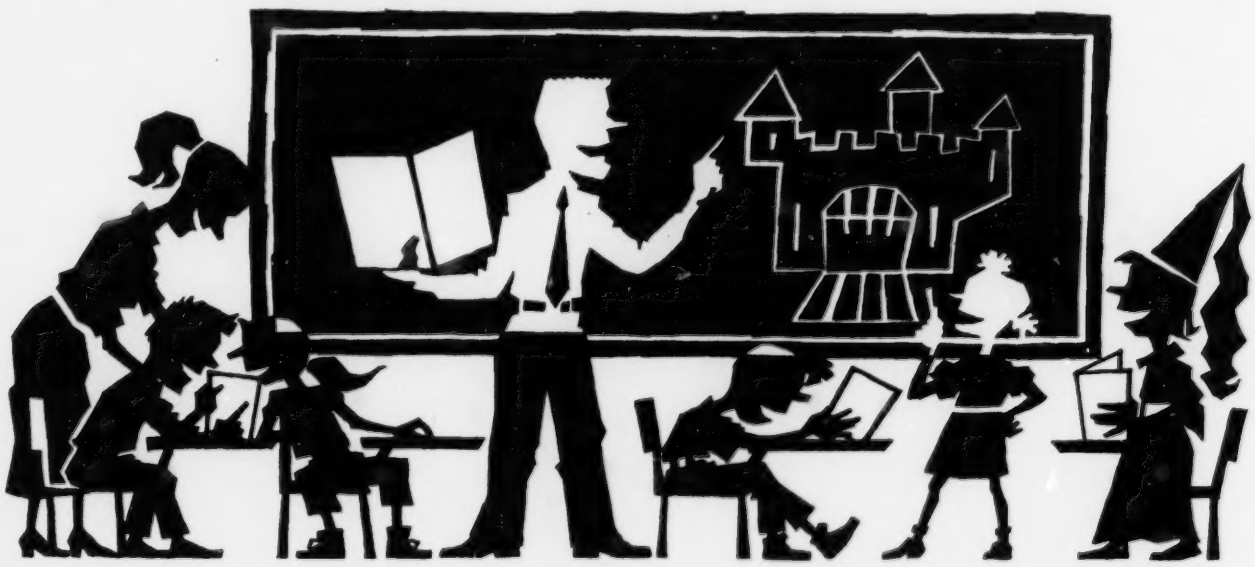
that require little more than a rich immersion in order to blossom, they are wrong. To the extent that they minimize the role of skilled decoding in reading comprehension, they are also wrong. And the pedagogical practices that flow from these faulty premises are wrong; indeed for many children they are a disaster. All children can benefit from and many children require systematic direct instruction in the elements of the alphabetic code. Each child is different, of course, and some need more extensive instruction in decoding skills than others. But as Keith Stanovich has so succinctly put it:

"That direct instruction in alphabetic coding facilitates early reading instruction is one of the most well-established conclusions in all of behavioral science....Conversely, the idea that learning to read is just like learning to speak is accepted by no responsible linguist, psychologist, or cognitive scientist in the research community."

Rather than being irrelevant or incidental to text comprehension, skilled decoding, it turns out, is central. Again, Marilyn Adams:

"...[I]t has been proven beyond any shade of doubt that skillful readers process virtually each and every word and letter of text as they read. This is extremely counter-intuitive. For sure, skillful readers neither look nor feel as if that's what they do. But that's because they do it so quickly and effortlessly. Almost automatically, with almost no conscious attention whatsoever, skillful readers recognize words by drawing on deep and ready knowledge of spellings and their connections to speech and meaning.

In fact, the automaticity with which skillful readers recognize words is the key to the whole system....The reader's attention can be focused on the meaning and message of a text only to the extent



that it's free from fussing with the words and letters."

A Whole Language approach that does not incorporate sufficient attention to decoding skills leaves in its wake countless numbers of youngsters who, in the words of one teacher, are surrounded by "beautiful pieces of literature that [they] can't read." As Joanna Williams of Teachers College, Columbia University, has observed: "Today, without strong direct systematic decoding instruction in regular first-grade classrooms, more and more children are being shunted into remedial classes, and even special education."

Also left in the wake are many teachers who can see clearly that some of their students are not doing well in a purist Whole Language environment but who are under tremendous pressure from their district or state to minimize the teaching of the alphabetic code. In an article in *Education Week,* one veteran teacher describes the environment that followed California's 1987 adoption of a "literature-based framework for teaching language arts" as one in which "officials in some elementary schools seized phonics books and spellers to ensure that teachers were not ignoring the new [Whole Language] instructional materials."

Pressures are also coming from the social dynamics within the profession. We have heard numerous stories from teachers who, labeled as "old-fashioned" or—worse yet—"resistant to change," have had to "hide their phonics books" or close their doors in order to "sneak in some phonics."

3. Systematic attention to the alphabetic code does not mean a return to the dreariness that characterized so much of the old phonics. Thanks to the dedicated work of many teachers and reading researchers, we now know a lot more than we used to about what constitute the critical elements of decoding and how to go about teaching them.

The days of the "drill and more drill" approach to phonics are over, as they should be, and no reasonable educator is suggesting a return to them. But neither do reasonable educators suggest that students do not need a reasonable amount of well-designed practice.

4. A carefully crafted, balanced approach to the teaching of reading requires considerable sophistication on the part of teachers. Joanna Williams describes the rigorous demands of the job:

"Teachers are often exhorted to be eclectic, as indeed they should be. Teaching children to read requires much knowledge and many skills. Moreover, children do not all respond equally well to the same teaching techniques. A teacher must be ready and able to switch strategies easily. A teacher must be equipped to jump in wherever required and provide appropriate feedback on the spot, whether it be with phonics information, an analogy, or a pointed question. (Of course, he or she must also know when not to jump in but rather let the child find his own way.) Teachers need good training to operate flexibly with multiple strategies and activities. They also need substantial knowledge about the way in which language is structured, particularly with

respect to its orthographic and phonological features. They must be able to teach their students about phonemes and how phonemes are represented in writing, and about morphemes (the smallest meaningful units in words) and their spelling patterns...."

But teachers are not receiving this kind of training. The amount of course work in the structure of spoken and written language required by teacher preparation programs and state certification standards are woefully inadequate for the demands of classroom life, particularly classrooms with low-readiness children and a diverse range of learners. Louisa Cook Moats, director of Teacher Training at the Greenwood Institute in Putney, Vermont, conducted a survey of experienced teachers to assess their knowledge of the structure of spoken and written language. Moats found "pervasive conceptual weaknesses in the very skills that are needed for direct, language-focused reading instruction, such as the ability to count phonemes and to identify phonics relationships....Typically, about 10 percent to 20 percent...could consistently identify consonant blends in written words....Less than half of those tested could identify the reduced vowel schwa consistently. Only 30 percent could explain when ck was used in spelling."

Moats points out that teachers cannot be expected to know what they have not been taught, and she urges reform of teacher preparation programs and certification requirements. "At present, motivated teachers are often left to obtain specific skills in teaching phonology, phonetics, orthography, and other language skills on their own by seeking out workshops or specialized instructional manuals."

Moats also notes the terrible toll this takes on teachers. The lack of a firm grasp of the knowledge they need to teach beginning readers—especially hard-to-reach, hard-to-teach children—leaves many dedicated teachers deeply frustrated. Worried that they are not doing a good job, their confidence shaken, many begin to rethink their career choice. Undoubtedly, this is a significant factor in the widely documented high attrition rate of new teachers.

While there are a number of reasons that help explain why teachers are not being offered the training they need, an

The ultimate goal of all reading and English language arts instruction is to allow students to become fluent readers, writers and thinkers, who are able to comprehend, learn from and add to the collective imagination, experience and wisdom of all human history.

article in *The Atlantic Monthly* may throw some light on the problem: "...in 1987 a survey of forty-three texts used to train teachers of reading found that none advocated systematic phonics instruction—and only nine even mentioned that there was a debate on the issue." Programs that do not believe in the value of systematic phonics are unlikely to provide teachers with the necessary knowledge base in the structure of language. As Moats concludes, "...language mastery is as essential for the literacy teacher as anatomy is for the physician. It is our obligation to enable teachers to acquire it."

5. It is certainly motive enough to know that the lives of millions of children depend on our ability to help them learn to read well. But there may be yet more at stake here. As increasing numbers of parents witness their second and third graders struggling through basic reading materials and lacking command of foundational spelling concepts and spelling-sound relationships, they come to feel that our pubic schools are failing in their most basic mission. According to a report issued in the summer of 1994 by the Public Agenda Foundation, "First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools," 60 percent of Americans harbor deep concerns that there is "not enough emphasis on the basics, such as reading, writing, and math." Higher standards and more challenging school work are strongly endorsed by the public, but they don't understand how "critical thinking" and "higher-order" skills are possible without mastery of certain basics:

> "In focus groups for this study and other Public Agenda education projects, people express a sense of frustration and even bewilderment at the inability of the public schools to make mastery of the basics common-place among the nation's children."

Keith Stanovich describes how parents' dissatisfaction with their children's progress in reading is fueling the movement toward privatizing education in Canada:

> "Parents with children who have trouble in early reading and who have not been given instruction in alphabetic coding will add fuel to the movement toward privatized education in North America. 'Parents Question Results of State-Run School System' is an increasingly frequent newspaper headline in Canadian provinces (e.g., Ontario) where phonics instruction is neglected or de-emphasized. The January 11, 1993, cover of Maclean's, Canada's weekly newsmagazine, was titled 'What's Wrong at School?' and featured numerous reports of parents seeking private education for children struggling in reading due to a lack of emphasis on alphabetic coding in school curricula....It is reported that Canada's private school enrollment jumped 15 percent in the single year of 1992."

Of course, private schools are just as likely—and the elite ones probably more likely—to have embraced a one-sided Whole Language approach. But parents are generally not well informed about the specifics of different instructional programs. They only know that their child is not doing well in his current setting, and they begin to look elsewhere.

IV. Background Reading

General Materials

Adams, Marilyn Jager, et al. *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children: A Classroom Curriculum.* Paul H. Brookes Pub. Co., (Oct. 1997).

Adams, Marilyn Jager. *Beginning To Read: Thinking and Learning about Print.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (1990).

California State Department of Education. *Read All About It.* (1999).

Hall, Susan A., and Moats, Louisa. *Straight Talk about Reading: How Parents Can Make a Difference during the Early Years.* Contemporary Books. (Oct. 1998).

National Research Council. *Starting Out Right: A Guide To Promoting Children's Reading Success.* National Academy Press. (1999).

Snow, Catherine E.; Burns, M. Susan; and Griffen, Peg, editors. *The Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children.* Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences. (1998).

AFT Materials

Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) Program

The American Federation of Teachers' Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) program is a union-sponsored, research-based professional development program. It was created by the AFT through collaboration between practitioners and researchers to encourage classroom educators to improve their practice and their students' achievement by becoming users of research. It is based on a training-of-trainers model. In a training-of-trainers model, individuals participate in activities that prepare them to train others, who, in turn, train still others in a pyramiding effect.

As a professional development program, the ER&D process is very different from traditional inservice, because it affords K-12 and postsecondary classroom educators the opportunity to gain access to research on teaching and learning in a form that gives them the ability to apply those findings effectively. ER&D offers three courses that directly relate to reading:

Beginning Reading Instruction: This course is designed to give participants the knowledge and skills necessary to provide all children with the strong foundation they must have to become successful readers. It will focus on strategies to teach beginning reading, with particular emphasis on helping students develop phonemic awareness, an understanding of the print-to-speech code, fluency, and comprehension. It is intended primarily for teachers of Kindergarten–grade 2, but it is also appropriate for teachers of upper elementary grades, whose students are still having difficulty with word recognition.

Reading Comprehension Instruction: This course focuses on research-based exemplary practices in the teaching of reading comprehension. Participants explore the nature of narrative and expository text and how students' knowledge of this can improve comprehension. Participants also learn instructional strategies to help students comprehend, learn from, and appreciate both forms of text. The course is intended primarily for elementary grade teachers, but is also appropriate for teachers of other grades whose students are still having difficulty with reading comprehension in literature and content area texts.

Early Reading Intervention: This course is intended to work with students who are at-risk for not learning to read or who have already developed reading disabilities. The intervention strategies presented build on the research and field tests of reading disability specialists who developed programs for intensive teaching of phonemic awareness and phonics. Along with the research translation, the course contains a three-step readiness and five-step beginning reading intervention for work with small groups of students. In addition, there are suggestions for activities to use to implement the steps. This course is intended to supplement an ongoing reading curriculum and does not take the place of the Beginning Reading Instruction strand.

AFT Educational Issues Policy Brief

- Reading Excellence Grants; *5 pages (April 1999) Single copy free. Also available on the Internet: http://www.aft.org/edissues/policybriefs*

Building on the Best, Learning from What Works: Research Reviews of Promising Educational Programs

This series provides background information about research-based programs that, when properly implemented, have a track record of raising student achievement significantly—particularly for at-risk students. Currently available:

- Six Promising Schoolwide Reform Programs; *28 pages (July 1998)*
- Seven Promising Reading and English Language Arts Programs; *32 pages (Jan. 1998)*

■ Five Promising Remedial Reading Intervention Programs; *(June 1999) Single copy free. Also available on the Internet: http://www.aft.org/edissues/rsa/guide/promising.htm*

Learning To Read, Reading To Learn

This booklet, co-published with the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center To Improve the Tools of Educators, offers a wealth of research-based information about the skills children need to become competent readers and the strategies that can help them. Included are: research-synthesized principles on learning to read; tips for teachers; tips for parents; names and addresses of organizations and experts willing to provide technical assistance; a bibliography; and an extensive resource guide. *54 pages. Item no. 178. Single copy $5; $3 each for five or more. (July 1997)*

Every Child Reading: An Action Plan

The Learning First Alliance, a coalition of 12 national education organizations committed to improving student learning in our public schools, sponsored this action paper on reform of reading instruction. The paper outlines research-based practices for achieving the goal of reading success for all children and presents an action plan that parents, teachers, administrators, policy makers, and other stakeholders can implement to begin an effective and comprehensive reform of reading instruction. The plan addresses three critical areas for action: professional development for teachers; early childhood and community outreach; and research, development, and materials. *28 pages. Item no. 180. Single copy $3; $2 each for five or more. Also available on the Internet: http://www.learningfirst.org/publications.html (June 1998)*

Helping Your Child Learn To Read

This booklet, co-published with the U.S. Department of Education, is ideal for distributing at parent-teacher conferences, open houses, back-to-school nights, and other events that attract lots of parents. This volume contains a collection of simple activities parents can use at home to stimulate their children's interest in reading and language. *58 pages. Item no. 350. Single copy $1; 65 cents each for 10 or more, with further discounts available to affiliates ordering in bulk. (Dec. 1994)*

Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able To Do

Thanks to new scientific research—plus a long-awaited scientific and political consensus around reading research—the knowledge exists to teach all but a handful of severely disabled children to read well. This report discusses the current state of teacher preparation in reading. It reviews the reading research and describes the knowledge base that is essential for teacher

candidates and practicing teachers to master if they are to be successful in teaching all children to read well. Finally, the report makes recommendations for improving the system of teacher education and professional development. *32 pages. Item no. 372. $5 each. (June 1999)*

Learning to Read: Schooling's First Mission

The summer 1995 edition of AFT's award-winning journal, *American Educator,* focuses on the large body of research on how to best teach reading to students and how much of the knowledge is not making its way into the classroom. Articles include "Resolving the 'Great Debate,'" by Marilyn J. Adams and Maggie Bruck; "The Role of Decoding in Learning To Read," by Isabel L. Beck and Connie Juel; and "The Missing Foundation in Teacher Education," by Louisa Cook Moats. *26 pages. Single copy free; multiple copies subject to availablity. Fax request to 202/879-4534.*

The Unique Power of Reading—and How To Unleash It

The summer 1998 edition of AFT's award-winning journal, *American Educator,* is dedicated entirely to reading and focuses on bridging the gap between research and practice. Articles include "What Reading Does for the Mind," by Anne E. Cunningham and Keith E. Stanovich; "The Elusive Phoneme," by Marilyn Jager Adams, Barbara R. Foorman, Ingvar Lundberg, and Terri Beeler; "Catch Them before They Fall," by Joseph K. Torgesen; "Teaching Decoding," by Louisa C. Moats; "Getting at the Meaning," by Isabel Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, Rebecca L. Hamilton, and Linda Kucan; and "Another Chance," by Jane Fell Greene. *96 pages. Single copy free; multiple copies subject to availablity. Fax request to 202/879-4534.*

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